

cut. I support a tax cut. And I think it should be retroactive to January 1 of this year to provide a needed boost to our economy.

Cutting taxes now will be helpful both to individual taxpayers and to our economy. But we also need to use some of the expected available surplus to pay down our Federal debt. If a country runs up a debt during tough times, it should pay it down during good times. And some of the surplus should be used to do other important things like improve our schools, provide emergency help to family farmers, and help the elderly afford prescription drug costs.

There is an effort by some to frame this tax cut debate in terms of whether one supports the President. But it is not about who we support. Rather, it's about what we support. What kind of a tax cut should we enact and how large should it be?

Here's what I think we should do:

One, enact the income tax cut in phases. The projected 10 year budget surpluses are just that, projections, and are not at all certain. Therefore we should be conservative. Enact the first phase of the tax cut now, and make it retroactive to January 1. In 2 years, if our economy is still producing the expected surpluses, add to the tax cut.

Two, cut income tax rates and do it in a way that provides fair tax cuts for all tax brackets.

Three, eliminate the marriage tax penalty in the income tax code.

Four, simplify filing requirements by allowing "return free filing" for up to 70 million Americans.

Five, totally exempt all family farms and family businesses from the estate tax and increase the estate tax exemption to two million dollars for all estates—\$4 million for married couples.

Six, add a tax credit for investments that are made in rural States, where there is out-migration of people. We should use this opportunity to use tax cuts to stimulate new jobs and economic growth in rural states that have been left behind.

Here are some of the major issues that we must consider as we enact this tax cut.

The President's plan assumes we will have budget surpluses for the next 10 years. I hope that is the case, but with the current slowdown in our economy, we ought to be cautious. Economic forecasts are no more reliable than weather forecasts. If we lock in a large tax cut and then do not get the expected surpluses, we will once again put our country in financial trouble.

One of the major priorities for using the surplus should be to pay down the Federal debt. It grew by trillions in the 80s and early 90s. Now we have the opportunity and an obligation to use part of these surpluses to pay down that debt.

Our Government collects about \$1 trillion in personal income taxes and about \$650 billion in payroll taxes from individuals each year. The top 1 percent of all income earners in the U.S.

pay 21 percent of all taxes, but under the President's plan they would receive 43 percent of the tax cut. That's not fair. We should make changes to the President's plan to provide a larger share of the tax cuts to working families.

A tax cut is a priority, but so too is fixing our schools, helping family farmers through tough times, dealing with the high prices of prescription drugs, and strengthening Medicare and Social Security. Yes, surpluses need to be used to cut taxes and reduce the debt, but some should be used to address other urgent needs that improve our country.

This debate is larger and more important than partisan politics. And these decisions are bigger than whether the Congress is supporting a new President.

Our country works best when we think ahead and think together. That is what we need to do on this issue.

VETERANS' HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES ACT OF 2001

Mr. BIDEN. Mr. President, I am privileged to be a cosponsor of the Veterans' Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2001, S. 131, and I will explain why this legislation is so important.

No one from either side of the aisle questions the importance of education as the steppingstone to success in the 21st century. We all know that the economy of the future is going to require people with specialized training and skills, while the unskilled labor that typified the 18th and 19th centuries is becoming less and less useful. In this regard, it is hardly surprising that Congress is flooded with proposals to enhance access to high-quality elementary education, secondary education, and higher education. I myself have strongly supported expansion of Pell Grants, broadening of student loans, and tax incentives to help families pay for a college education.

As we rightly promote the importance of government help for higher education, it might be useful to recall that one of the first, and most successful, of these higher education initiatives was the GI bill that was enacted back in 1944. Following World War II, millions of veterans were able to obtain college educations through the GI bill, with the result that many were able to attain a standard of living they could not have imagined. Furthermore, all this college-trained talent contributed to the burst of economic advances that improved life for all of us over the ensuing decades.

Fast forward 57 years. We still have a GI bill, and in our highly successful all-volunteer military, it turns out that the single most important factor that attracts many young people to join the military is the availability of educational benefits after discharge. Yet the current GI bill suffers from one big flaw: the educational stipend is no longer sufficient to pay for the cost of a college education.

The current monthly payment in the GI bill has not come close to matching the rate of inflation in educational costs over the past 50 years. Just consider these statistics. At present, the standard GI bill benefit is \$650 per month for 36 months. That is it. Moreover, we now ask servicemembers who want educational benefits after discharge to contribute \$1200 while they are in the military. By contrast, when it began in 1944, the GI bill benefit included full tuition and fees at any educational institution to which the veteran could gain admittance, PLUS a monthly stipend equivalent to \$500 in 2001 dollars, \$750 for married veterans.

We thus find ourselves in an anomalous situation: at the same time that the Government is ramping up its support and subsidy for non-veterans seeking college educations, the program that started this whole thing, and which provides key benefits for those who put their lives at risk for the country, is lagging way behind.

The Veterans' Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2001 goes a long way toward redressing this situation. The key provision of this bill is quite simple: the total VA educational stipend under the Montgomery GI Bill will be increased to a level equal to the average cost of tuition at 4-year public colleges. In other words, the standard 36 months of GI bill benefits will be sufficient to allow a veteran to attend college and complete a degree.

The Veterans Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2001 provides the minimal benefit that we should be offering to those who are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to keep our country free and prosperous, and I encourage my colleagues to support it.

FARMERS AND RANCHERS ON NATIONAL AGRICULTURE

Mr. JOHNSON. Mr. President, today marks National Agriculture Day. Unfortunately, what should be a celebration is instead overshadowed by the grim reality that many of the hard-working families producing food for this Nation and world are having a difficult time making ends meet.

I salute our farmers and ranchers for many reasons. First, Americans spend less than anyone in the world on their grocery bill. Roughly 11 percent of our household income is spent on food, and it takes a mere 38 days to earn enough income to pay a food bill for the entire year. We truly enjoy the most nutritious, affordable, and stable food supply in the world.

Furthermore, the American economic engine depends upon a strong agricultural sector to run on all cylinders. Indeed the agricultural economy is central to my State's prosperity or adversity. According to South Dakota State University, the multiplied value of agriculture's impact on South Dakota's economy was \$16 billion in 1999, one-fourth of our total economic output and more than double that of